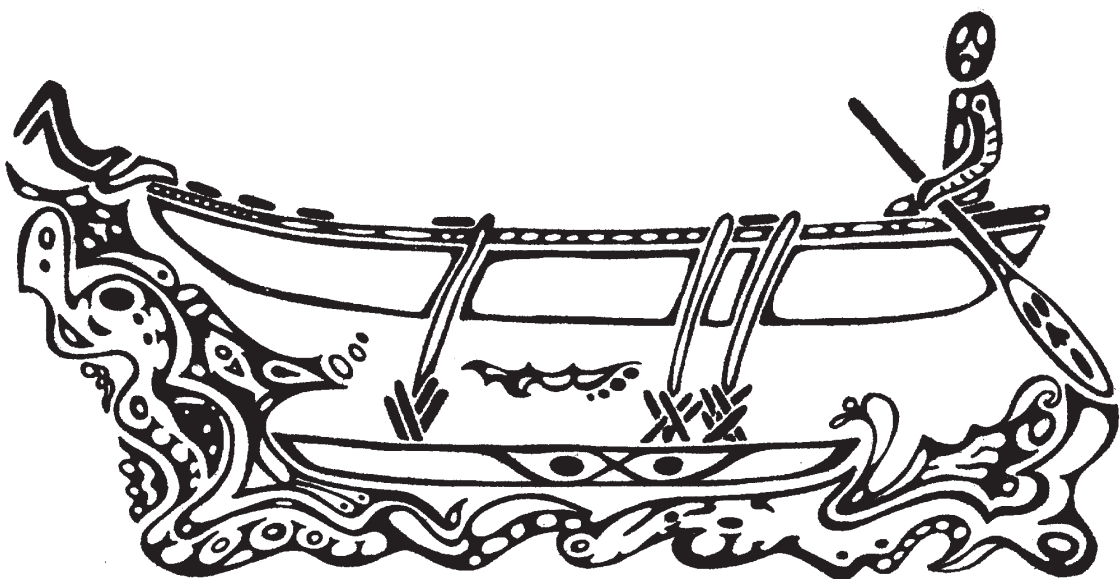




The Journey of the Dead

Ink on paper, 1992, 40 cm x 27 cm



Detail from *The Journey of the Dead*, by Ralph Regenvanu. 1992.

The Journey of the Dead

Told by Chief Sukon of Emil Potnambe

In the traditional belief of our ancestors, when a person from Uripiv dies, their spirit eventually departs the island to join other spirits of the dead in a place near the big fire where all the dead spirits go, on the island of Ambrym. However, the spirit only begins its journey after it has discovered that it belongs to a person who has died. It happens like this:

On the morning of the first day following the burial, the spirit of the dead person would go down to the beach on the other side of the island and stand there to warm itself in the rays of the sun as it rose from the east. As the sunlight threw the shadow of the spirit on the beach, the spirit, seeing its own shadow, would notice that its shadow was headless. A headless shadow is the mark of the spirit of a dead person. It was then that the spirit came to realize that it now belonged to a dead person.

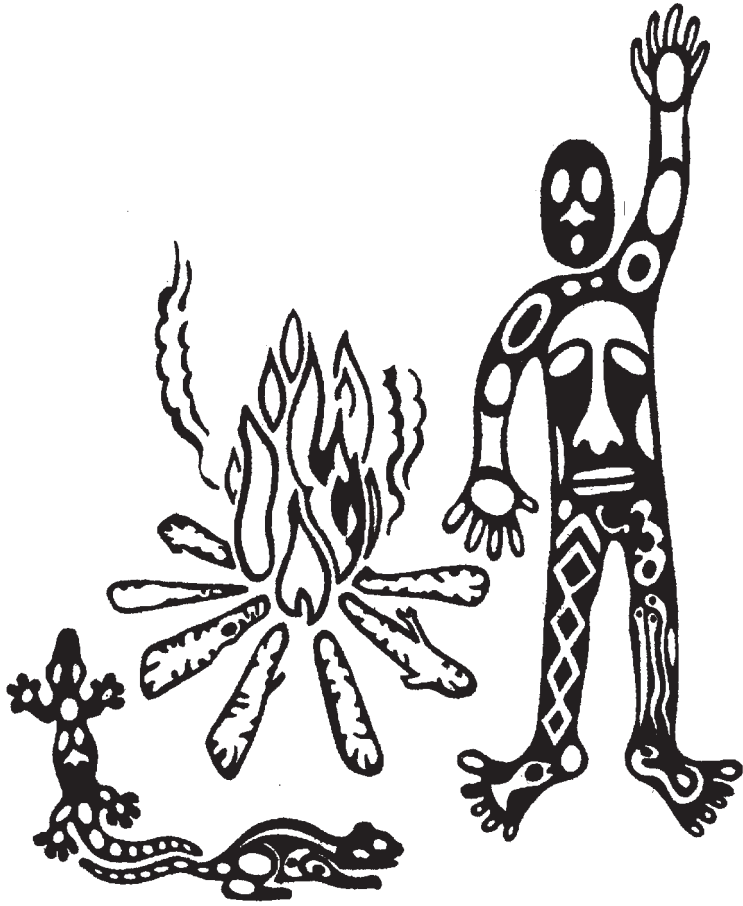
The spirit would then begin its journey to leave the island of Uripiv (the island of the living) in order to join the rest of the spirits in the spirit world on the island of Ambrym (the island of the dead). The spirit would first journey out from Uripiv in a southerly direction toward Pankumu near Tisman. Then from Pankumu, the spirit would go on to the tip of the point of Tisman (the longest point on the east coast of Malakula, facing the island of Ambrym). This point is known as Bongnaon and, because of its association with the spirits of the dead, is revered by people of Uripiv to this day. Here, on the following morning, the spirit would light a fire to send a signal of smoke to Ambrym. This particular signal traditionally means that the person sending it has a message.

The spirits on Ambrym, noticing the signal of smoke, would send a spirit originally from Ambrym to Bongnaon to find out who was sending the message; in particular, what island or community in Malakula the

spirit sending the message was from, what the message was about, and who the message was intended for. The Ambrym spirit would travel by canoe over to the Bongnaon point to find this out. When it had found out that the spirit had come from the island of Uripiv, it would travel back to Ambrym to the camp where the spirits of the dead from Uripiv were and tell them what the message was. Meanwhile, the recently dead spirit would have to wait at the Bongnaon point until one of the spirits of Uripiv came over to get him.

Having passed on the message to the community of Uripiv spirits, the Ambrym spirit then left it to the Uripiv spirits to take care of the rest. One of the Uripiv spirits would then paddle from Ambrym across to the Bongnaon point to meet the waiting spirit there and bring him back with him to Ambrym. There it would be able to join the rest of the spirits of the dead from Uripiv in their camp near the large fire (or volcano) known as Marum.

The women and the men would come together to celebrate with a maki (grade-taking ceremony) and with singing and dancing to welcome the new arrival. The spirits of the dead from Uri, Wala, Rano, Tautu, Litzlitz, Vao, and Atchin, who also had their own camps in Ambrym near the big fire, would also join in the celebration. Whenever a new spirit arrived to join the company of other spirits, it was an occasion for all the spirits to come together for feasting, celebration, and many other activities to mark the arrival of the new spirit.



Detail from *The Journey of the Dead*, by Ralph Regenvanu. 1992.